

ART I M A G E



Ecstatic Uselessness: The Art of Tim Hawkinson

Charles Darwin, Haunted by Beauty

Warren Farha: Autobiography of a Book

David McGlynn Tightens His Belt

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Ecstatic Uselessness *The Weird Tools of Tim Hawkinson*

A device for making graduated multiple drawing was improvised using approximately forty ballpoint pens and a collapsible hat rack. The pens were wired onto the pegs of the hat rack. The hat rack was anchored to the center of the sheet of paper by one of the corner pegs, and a large ballerina was drawn with the opposing peg-pen at the outer edge of the paper, producing a phalanx of thirty-nine increasingly smaller ballerinas, each distinguished from the others by height and width. Repeating this process completed a whirlpool of pirouetting ballerinas.

—Tim Hawkinson

WHEN Richard Grayson organized the 2002 Sydney Biennale, one wondered why Tim Hawkinson's quirky experiments with the metaphysical properties of life were not included. After all, the international lineup featured art practices deemed to pursue alternative universes, hallucinatory consciousness, and cosmic wonder. Under the parenthetical titular umbrella (*The World May Be*) *Fantastic*, any of Hawkinson's objects or installations, from his 1995 ballerina ink drawing to his refreshingly idiosyncratic accounts of human history, would have been in good company with Panamarenko's impotent flying machines and Joyce Hinterding's wacko transmutations of electronic signals.

For whatever curatorial choices are worth in privileging artistic worldviews, I turn back to 2002 to the moment when Hawkinson, after arriving on the international scene at the 1999 Venice Biennale, brought his work to New York City for a solo show at Ace Gallery. As fate would have it, the subject of the Ace show, *Überorgan*, is now one of the star attractions of a retrospective collaboratively organized by the Whitney and Los Angeles County art museums. As Los Angeles curator Howard Fox puts it, "*Überorgan* is the artist's most ambitious machine...titanic in scale, Olympian in conception." A pipe-organ construction occupying sixteen thousand square feet, *Überorgan* is, according to Fox, the artist's magnum opus [see Plate 1].

In an era when the gargantuan has been made perceptually normative by the Humvee, *Uberorgan*'s massiveness is a fitting over-the-top commentary on out-of-control body parts that threaten human lives lived too large. By strapping the huge organ contraption above spectators' heads in midtown Manhattan, Hawkinson poses a close and curious relation between the above and below, between inner space and outer space. Above hangs a vast celestial network of bulbous, biomorphic balloon forms and long, silvery tubes; below we stand, necks strained, to reflect on our corporeal existence projected outside of our skin. With Nietzschean and Kantian aesthetics in mind, Howard Fox remarks on *Uberorgan*'s scale: "It is so ungainly, so unwieldy, so downright preposterous, that if the spectator's initial response is amusement and amazement, it soon comes to embrace something of the experience of the sublime—a response to the unfathomable, the unknowable, the infinite."

I would agree that *Uberorgan* figures largely, so to speak, in Hawkinson's art repertoire. But it does more than that: *Uberorgan* is a consummate example of the artist's brilliance and ingenuity in uniting materiality, method, mischief, and metaphysical metaphor in nearly two decades of a recognized art practice. Fabricated from polyethylene balloons, cardboard tubing, air, and a concocted "self-playing" mechanical relay scrolling system [see Plate 2], *Uberorgan*'s piping structure simulates to a ridiculous degree the alignment of a singing cosmos with that of the poly-systematic, multi-planar, and plastic qualities of our own human bodies.

No doubt Christian narrative and mores lurk around this complex work, what with the grand rendering of an organ that includes religious hymns in its mixed medley of cosmic tunes. But placing *Uberorgan* within the continuum of the artist's practice, we find his metaphysical musings have been *potcheked* around with by his apparent need to tweak his own virtuosic attempts at creative engineering as if purposefully to act out the human biblical fall.

Many questions surround Hawkinson's metaphysical interests, and Lawrence Rinder has purposefully curated the artist's mid-career retrospective as if his sole interest were to foreground the broad metaphysical arc that hovers illuminated over the artist's work. Catalog essayist Howard Fox, for instance, draws attention to Hawkinson's "secular spirituality," Rinder himself declares Hawkinson's artwork "supernatural," while Doug Harvey likens Hawkinson to Jesus. Should we think it's strange that within a five-year spread during which the U.S. government has moved ideologically to the religious right, Hawkinson's oeuvre should just so happen to shift to private ruminations on questions that draw mystics, philosophers, religionists, and artists to the proverbial roundtable? Or has it taken nearly a decade for the American art community to come to terms with the rich and not necessarily ironic visual language of metaphysics that finds its root in some of Hawkinson's earliest works? In this essay I intend to penetrate the

curatorial frame of Hawkinson's "spirituality" and go directly to some of his key objects and installations that allow us to consider how Descartes, Darwin, and the Holy Spirit all figure significantly in Hawkinson's development as an artist. Allow me to preface my inquiry with three remarks.

First: to pitch the "spiritual" in Hawkinson's art practice is to sidestep the obvious Christian themes and imagery that pervade his oeuvre. In titling *Magdalen* (2003), *Pentecost* (1999), *Jerusalem Cross* (1997), *Penitent* (1994), and *Saint Francis Reliquary* (1987), the artist himself begs the question of Christian influence. The issue before us is whether the term "spiritual" rather than the term "Christian" opens up a playing field wherein Romantic and modernist propositions must share space with all the pedigree and mongrel varieties of American religious and mystical practice.

Second: Rinder curatorially positions Hawkinson's artistic method as one that "obstinately avoids high-tech shortcuts," but Rinder hardly treats Hawkinson's material meditations as those of a twenty-first-century Luddite. Rather, the term "high-tech shortcuts" suggests the artist's distrust of modernist linear schemes of problem-solving, especially where they involve the unrestrained development of an electronic technology that often leaves the human subject and the human hand out of the equation. Loaded as his oeuvre is with references to Cartesian dualism and the conflicted seventeenth-century materialist ideals of the scientific revolution, one has to wonder if it is the technological efficiency that troubles Hawkinson or simply the prospect of Cartesian dualism coming to an end. As I will discuss later on, this query makes its way into the issues that surround the artist's apparent dualist handling of the automaton.

Third: in 1998, *World Sculpture News* published an interview I conducted with Hawkinson concerning his then current exhibit at Ace California in Los Angeles. The Ace show won stunning reviews that hailed the arrival of a true "mad scientist" upon a local art scene dominated by the notorious "belter-skelter" aesthetics of Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy (the former's work is said to have influenced Hawkinson during his graduate school days at UCLA). Like my colleagues, I was drawn to the tinkering motif that wooed audiences from LA to Milan, but even more, I was curious about his logo-mysticism of the body, history, and the origins of creation, especially his repeated use of the self-portrait to depict what appeared to be a capricious meditation on Cartesian objectivism. Today, I am pleased to find that I am no longer alone in entertaining the pressing ontological and teleological query that Hawkinson puts before us with his funky conceptual materialism. I would urge the reader of the retrospective catalog essays, however, wherein Fox, Rinder, and Harvey assert the "spiritual" in Hawkinson's art, to approach with care.

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say, which is unfortunate when one thinks past the common American use of the term *secular* to consider the ancient Latin distinction between that which is temporal (secular) and that which is spiritual or eternal (non-secular). Giving Fox's idea of secular spirituality a rhetorical spin, we land upon a paradox of meaning which may be Fox's point when he states, "Though he frequently makes reference to Christian themes, his art is not sectarian or denominational, it is a secular expression of spirituality."

Here we have the paradigmatic American modern-art Brahmin fear of art merging with or being taken over by religious ideals. The modernist curator believes that to serve and survive (pre-Bush) American culture's allegiance to the separation of church and state, art must sever its ties to specific religious gods and instead pay obeisance to here-and-now, quotidian cultural critique, or at the very least place its faith in the positivism that is presumed by a fully emerged American technocracy. Secularism, in other words, guarantees the stamp of relativism coded in terms of universality and overwrites the signature of a particular religious logic.

Still, allowing Fox the benefit of the doubt to frame Hawkinson's work for a diverse and truly multicultural American public, we find him promoting the cosmological and cartographic practices of the seventeenth-century physician Robert Fludd as a way to fathom the artist's mixed-media metaphysics. Fludd, it seems, was a controversial figure in the drama of French and British philosophers wrestling with the Neoplatonic mind/body debates, especially those concerning the rise of the automaton. Attuned to Greek therapeutics which privileged music with healing and spiritual agency, Fludd adapted Neoplatonic alchemy to his own efforts in hopes of mapping out music's simultaneous affective and mathematical capacity to transform the human soul. In the minds of Catholic Cartesians like the philosopher and friar Marin Mersenne, Fludd rendered his Neoplatonic alchemical vision in aestheticized cartographic terms, bearing all of the marks of an indefensible Christian and scientific argument: art as affect could simply not stand up to art's mathematical logic, that is, art's transformation into design. Despite his own conflicted Cartesian dualism, Mersenne contested Fludd's influence and reduced music's metaphysical properties to the quantifying science of acoustics.

It does seem strange, if not uncanny, to think back on the seventeenth-century drama that appears now to foreshadow Hawkinson's apparent rejection of late-capitalist, anxious positivism held by an art community trained to think of ontology and cosmology in either neo-Marxist or sci-fi terms. That said, Hawkinson's musical allusions to cosmic order operate on many levels, including those that compel us to think through the ways in which heretical forms of Christianity filter through alchemical science—in ways that both Fludd and Hawkinson put to the test. *Überorgan*, for instance, is an unintentional yet remarkable testimony to Fludd's alchemical and Christian science where the artis-

maps out, in sculptural form, a relationship between the macrocosm and the microcosm, between the massive organ above and our tiny bodies below.

Pentecost is another of Hawkinson's works that should leave no doubt in the viewer's mind as to the specifically Catholic narrative that surfaces in the artist's work [see Plate 3]. *Pentecost*, like *Überorgan*, is a large, sonorous, and motorized installation that mimics the vital generative energy of human life forms. Where the super-duper *Überorgan* loomed large overhead as if a divine or monstrous vital organ was dropping down to planet earth, *Pentecost* pictorializes the Judaic-Christian root metaphor of the tree of life (though the sculpted tree shaft stands firmly on the museum floor like a store-bought Christmas tree). Spawning branches in all directions and inhabited by homunculi that recline, sit, and stand (upside down and right side up), *Pentecost* offers an unorthodox fantasy on the story of the twelve apostles who gathered for a communal meal and ended up speaking in tongues. The figures are wired up to produce a cacophony of sound, and are all decorated with a pattern generated by the artist in a previous work, *Bathtub-generated Contour Lace* (1995). *Bathtub-generated Contour Lace* originated first as an ink-on-paper drawing that resulted from a method of self-portraiture involving the transposition of a photograph to a drafted image. As Hawkinson describes it in the catalog:

I lay in a bathtub that was slowly being filled with black paint. A photograph was taken every few minutes as the liquid crept up and over diminishing islands of my skin. Superimposing these images, a contoured pattern emerged that I then rendered in a drawing of lace.

Contour Lace was an important work for Hawkinson, functioning like a genetic code that gave directions for *Drain and Plug* (1996), *Bath Jinn* (1999), and *Log (with Homunculi)* (1999). All of the works, in other words, developed out of an adaptive visual system that gave rise to new experiments, new visual vocabulary, and new grammars of human life forms and patterns—all of which were brought to bear on *Pentecost*. With the Christian narrative of grace in mind, Hawkinson transforms a theme of biological destiny into an occasion to contemplate the metaphysical implications of divine intervention.

Where there arises a need to discuss Hawkinson's specific religious inferences, there is, in keeping with his pre-modern alchemical interests, just cause to address the artist's very modern, thoroughly West-Coast, Duchampian-dadaist handling of everyday material (which curator Rinder addresses in his text for the retrospective catalog). *Pentecost*, for example, brings the viewer into close proximity with the artist's low-tech conceptual fabrication aesthetic. Where *Überorgan* maximized the possibilities of inflatable plastic, *Pentecost* grew out of utterly natural building materials—foam core, tape, cardboard tubes, wire—with the addition of a found computer program to produce a truly unnaturalistic

rendering of the twelve apostles. Eschewing the metals and macho minimalism of an earlier sculptural age, Hawkinson's Pick'n-Save, thrift-shop approach to scavenging domestic items and retired industrial and craft products has inspired him to mine precise physical attributes for a playful self-effacing poetics of the human condition. Curator Lawrence Rinder believes the bricolage practice wholly determines the artist's ability to render the supernatural in art. He writes, "With a combination of imagination and ingenuity, Hawkinson creates works that make us feel that anything is possible." He continues:

He ignores the difficulties of scale; elicits strange effects from common materials, and coaxes ethereal sounds out of rudimentary machines. He obstinately avoids high-tech shortcuts, preferring time consuming but viscerally satisfying hand fabrication. The hint of the supernatural that hovers around many of his works is echoed in his oeuvre as a whole. "How could one person have thought of all of this," one wonders, "let alone made it?"

Rinder seems to think that Hawkinson's unorthodox tinkering comes as a blow-your-mind surprise to a consumer culture entrained to abandon imagination and intelligence in order to survive in a split-brained economy shaped by Viacom's dumb and dumber forms of branded entertainment and a fast-track, Bluetooth, think-tank design paradigm of wireless communication and navigation devices. Rinder may not be wrong to privilege Hawkinson's heady artistry above the mind-numbing grain of mediocrity in popular culture, but I don't think it is because we're dumb or estranged from curiosity and homegrown ingenuity. Rather, for an age trained to think in terms of branding and open-source and networked intelligence, loner creativity is simply a tired fantasy of a forgotten past. Taking care to avoid a reductive materialist positioning of the artist's practice, Rinder speculates that it is Hawkinson's ontological and teleological inquiry that draws art audiences to gape and wonder at the "mystery of human existence, the possibilities of free will, and the passage of time."

With Rinder's estimations in mind, let us stop to be frank about the ever widening gap in audience response to the artist's query into the nature of BEING and TIME. It is a gap that separates a generation of Heidegger-readers from a generation of *Ghost in the Shell*-viewers, an abyss that fails to reconcile old-fart metaphysics with seductively new and shiny animé mythology. With techno-combine works like *Emoter* (2002) Hawkinson at once assuages an older generational fear of a cyborg future and feeds the youthful realization of its triumphant arrival [see Plate 4]. *Emoter* is one of Hawkinson's relatively flat-on-the-wall, cybernetic self-portraits, a kind of electric pinball wall chart that lights up a fractured and distorted photo image of the artist. It is hardly a cute rendering, reminding us instead of those nasty little pictures we took of our teenaged monkey faces while jamming our bodies into instant photo booths.

Emoter, in other words, holds a grotesquely elegant contradiction, the assumption that what makes us truly human is our spiritual capacity to feel pathos, joy and melancholy, and the equally confident supposition that our emotions are fully subject to chemical and electronic intervention.

For those who have kept an eye on the mechanical in late-twentieth-century art discussions, Hawkinson's makeshift venture into the world of the automaton departs from the hulking, brooding, bad-boy robotics of Mark Pauline and the Survival Research Laboratory and remains a far cry from Simon Penny's critical computational aesthetic ironically made manifest in gestures performed by inefficient dumb "bots. More gizmo toys than AI tots, Hawkinson's rickety mechanical objects have more in common with late-twentieth-century offshoots of Bruce Connor's "rat bastard constructions" that appropriated the flotsam and jetsam of ordinary American life in the service of self-examination parading as searing postwar social critique. By feeding electrical currents through an inherited West Coast aesthetic tradition, Hawkinson fetishizes the everyday to the point where the viewer must question the existential relationship between the animate and the inanimate.

In many works, the animate is not just signaled by way of electronic action, but as we find in *Slag* (1992) and in *Drip* (2002) the vitality of Hawkinson's automatons is coded in terms of time made relative by synching movement to a slow repetitive meter of sound, sometimes articulated by a rotation of motorized gears, at other times by a computer-generated spacing of noise, like dripping water into buckets. In Hawkinson's sculptural universe, human vitality and chronology are held captive in a Cartesian world of springs and gears or in an Edisonian matrix of circuit boards and relay switches.

If Hawkinson's mixed ontological metaphors transit the viewer into the realm of the supernatural, we must look to the artist's seize/inspect/destroy/rebuild method of art that submits the substance, pattern, texture, and scale of mundane materials like wire and latex to structural and conceptual metamorphosis. And if Carl Jung is right, metamorphosis is the process by which one's deepest ontological profile, one's truest spiritual nature is revealed in time. In the Zeus-like hands of the artist, metamorphosis turns rawhide dog chews into a bony robotic penitent, aluminum foil into a *nature morte* display of a decaying knight in shining armor (*Armor Ooze*, 1996). Multivalence and pliability are obvious poetical and material hallmarks of Hawkinson's aesthetic; overkill is nowhere to be found. Metamorphosis, after all, is not a process of waste and excess but one of filtering through the filings of the unconscious in order to organize and externalize the true destiny of one's interior life, be it the latent timekeeping powers of the young maiden Persephone or those made manifest by Hawkinson's *Hairbrush Clock* (1996).

Hawkinson's transformation of the natural into the supernatural robotic

thus draws us excitedly into reflection and speculation about our metaphysical origins, and in so doing he paves the way toward a twenty-first-century paradigm shift that allows for a unification of what some philosophers regard as the two Platonisms. Here I refer again to the argument between those who embrace the alchemical and metaphysical doctrines of Plato's teachings and those who reject those doctrines in favor of the mathematical explication of Plato's ideal forms. Morris Berman tells us that our modern Enlightenment account of the "pure" mechanistic philosophy of Galileo, for instance, has distorted our understanding of the complicated philosophic mindset that ushered in the first stage of the Scientific Revolution. Today we find ourselves in a different epoch of double Platonism, a period that pushes Newtonian certainty into a humbled reflective posture to consider the physical and metaphysical implications of quantum uncertainty. It is also a stage where life science, namely biology, has broken from the ideological grip of physics and is developing its own ethos of understanding indeterminate life forms without a need for unified field theory. In light of the efforts to unite biology and physics to birth the science (and economy) of the biotech, the metaphysical inquiry into the relation of minds, bodies, and souls has taken on virtual and evolutionary dimensions.

In Hawkinson's art practice, we find the old Platonic dualism forsaken in his impressive American handling of the *chindogu*. In the April 2005 issue of *Wired Magazine*, Suzanne Wu tells us the *chindogu* or "weird tools" are an entire line of Japanese inventions with the sole purpose of having no purpose. It might be more apt to say that *chindogu* have no purpose except to burlesque modern functionality without any intent to be brought to patent. Part fluff, part satire, *chindogu* range from a baby romper-cum-floor mop to a stroll-and-style hairdryer with gangly tubes that funnel air from bellowed shoe pads to an inflatable hairnet. Like Hawkinson's *Ranting Mop Head (Synthesized Voice)* (1995), the *chindogu* struggle to break free of an economy of functional design all the while taunting the cultural obsession with modern efficiency and the neurotic craving to multi-task.

As a maker of very weird tools, Hawkinson, like his Japanese counterparts, portrays a twenty-first-century, conceptualist satire that redeems the discarded and rescues the mass-produced throwaway, and in so doing solves the problem of double Platonism. In other words, the *chindogu* practice results from the joint innovation of alchemical and empirical imaginations to test and transform materials and mechanical attributes of usefulness into properties of ecstatic, divine uselessness. Hawkinson, the apparent *chindogu* master, weds the practices and the personae of the scientist and mystical philosopher and shows us the way out of a four-hundred-year-old cosmological and aesthetic argument.

Double Platonism aside, catalog essayist Doug Harvey claims that when it comes to transforming the discarded, the more likely alignment is not with Plato

but with Jesus. Harvey is not thinking so much of shared carpentry skills or even the seemingly miraculous ways in which Hawkinson charges modern materials like computer programs and vinyl with spiritual aura. Rather it is the mutual way in which the two men focus their attention on the phenomenal here and now. Harvey declares:

What Jesus was about was paying attention and withholding judgment—essential tools for making art. Tim Hawkinson is sort of like Jesus the way he insists that the cast-offs of society contain everything we value or consider meaningful, the catalyst being attention. See *Magdalen*.

For all of its blithe intellectual gravity, Harvey's declaration does counter the nervous curatorial handling of Hawkinson's Christian interests. Turning to *Magdalen*, we discover one of the artist's more horrifically ominous sculptures: a larger-than-life cloaked figure that looks like it chewed its way out of the artist's molding of materials—paper, wire, foam rubber, and caulking—to stalk the earth [see Plate 5]. Towering thirteen feet tall, *Magdalen* hangs like a dried carcass of a hydra fiend. Hawkinson refers to it as a monster tire blowout, but his title suggests something more: the demonized Mary turned holy whore by Christ's loving act of redemption.

The *Magdalen* got a lot of press recently, when the Catholic Church publicly renounced Dan Brown's fictive interpretation of the historical Mary. While contemporaneous with the publication of *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), Hawkinson's *Magdalen* neither visually nor conceptually hinges on the novel's depiction, but I would not be surprised if, after viewing Hawkinson's sculpture, spectators return home to surf the web for blogs on the Brown controversy.

Pop press aside, Harvey is right. The construction of *Magdalen*'s tire-tread body is completely in keeping with Hawkinson's redemptive art practice and, I would add, his fancy for corporeal simulation, though the levels of transmutation that Hawkinson contemplates outwit sober alchemical science. It is fair to say nonetheless that in a number of cases, especially the more recent works, simulation serves to clarify Hawkinson's thoughts regarding the objective limits of the human body along with his feelings concerning the industrial imperative to make archival the perishable.

Modernity's fantasy of extending and preserving life beyond biological borders was born of a nineteenth-century military-industrial age when the image of the dynamo steam engine had been completely digested as a metaphor of human power and will. By the time aluminum foil and plastics—polystyrene, polyethylene, and synthetic polymers—were invented, pre-World War II American culture was ready to retool its imagination to rethink the concepts of "surface" and "immortality" for conditions increasingly post-human.

Hawkinson well understands how our complex corporeality, brokered by

modern investments in the archival and the simulated, is now transacted in terms of plastic and wearable metals. From Tupperware and prosthetics to Gunther von Hagens's anatomical theater of plastination, modernity's obsession with making archival the perishable is subjected to the artist's whimsical examination, highlighted most effectively in his approach to the convention of the self-portrait [see front cover]. In some instances, Hawkinson's aesthetic self-projection takes the form of a fully inflated latex body floating toward the sky like a modern-day Icarus kite. In these moments, the body is allowed its metaphysical inferences, especially with titles like *Pneuman* (from *pneuma*, meaning breath or spirit). Elsewhere self-projection is corralled into baffling experiments that result in cartographic recordings of body surface and body boundaries. *Humongolous* (1995) and *Life-size Mirror Self-portrait* (2000) are comical spoofs on skin stretched out like animal hide and pressed into a framed Cartesian grid. Art historian Mario Perniola reminds us that in the long pictorial history of rendering the body as garment, post-Cartesian Baroque painting practices pushed representation into a space that pictured animal fur and human skin as sensually coequal. Comparing Boucher's handling of Venus disarming Cupid to Bernini's Saint Theresa, Perniola opines, "In the latter, clothing was as vibrant and lively as a body, and, in the former, the body was as external and glorious as a garment..." In Hawkinson's framed portraits, his body surface is modeled, measured, and translated into various forms of Caucasian orangey-beige plastic and carefully decorated with a pattern of tiny, evenly spaced squares. *Life-size Mirror Self-portrait* incorporates aluminum foil into the background of the sculpted body image, suggesting at once a reflective surface and the circumstances under which the portrait was made.

As the key to Cartesian rationalism, and as the contested icon of twentieth-century art-historical discourse vis-à-vis the writings of Rosalind Krauss, Hawkinson could not have picked a more perfect mapping system than the grid to exploit his irreverent self-examination. And what better modern materials than plastic and aluminum foil to parody the modernist fantasy of a rationally controllable environment and rationally controllable humanity? There is something eerie and brilliant about Hawkinson's adaptation of archival materials to represent modernity's primary world view, and it is beautifully unsettling to suggest that our investment in rationality draws heavily on the price of human skin. Skin, after all, is loaded with insurmountable social and political significance and carries the poetical weight of what the ancient Hebrews regarded as the "spiritual veil." In the bio-evolutionary sense, skin is our largest organ and a close sibling to the central nervous system, born of the same tissue and destined to be in constant contact with the brain. It is ironic that at the most superficial layer of the skin's intelligence network, dead cells organize to present our body image to the world. In his self-portraits and figurative works like the previously mentioned



PLATE 1. Tim Hawkinson. *Oberorgan*, 2000. Installation view at 590 Madison Avenue, New York City. Woven polyethylene balloons, nylon, cardboard tubing, mechanical components, and air. Dimensions variable. Andrea Nasher Collection. Photo by Sheldon Collins.



PLATE 2. Tim Hawkinson. *Oberorgan* (detail). Photo by Sheldon Collins.



PLATE 3. TIM HAWKINSON. *Pentecost*, 1999. Polystyrene foam, sematubes, silencers, found computer program, mechanical components. Dimensions variable. Andrea Naeher Collection. Photo courtesy of Art Gallery.



PLATE 4. Tim Hawkinson. *Emoter*, 2002. Altered inkjet print on plastic and foam core on panel, monitor, stepladder, and mechanical components. Print: 49 x 36 x 4 inches; stepladder: 27 x 24 x 19 inches; cable length: 174 inches. Andrea Naber Collection. Photo courtesy of Ace Gallery.



PLATE 5. Tim Hawkinson. *Magdalen*, 2003. Paper, wire, string, foam rubber, and caulking. 156 x 64 x 32 inches. Andrea Nasher Collection.



PLATE 6. Brian Mains. *Winged Figure*, 1987. Acrylic on canvas. 96 x 66 inches. Collection of Jim Starrett and Pat Styles, Venice, California.



PLATE 7. Brian Mains. *Untitled*, 1978. *Acrylic on canvas*. 84 x 74 inches. Collection of Gary Kubena, Houston.



PLATE 8. Brian Mains. *Dark Vortex*, 1985. *Acrylic on canvas*. 66 x 66 inches. Courtesy of Hanesken Schmitt, Houston.



PLATE 9 Brian Kline. *Wheel of Life*, 1994. Acrylic on canvas. 66 x 66 inches. Collection of Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art, Utah State University.



PLATE 10. Beat Mair. *Misericordia*, 2001. Acrylic on canvas, 66 x 48 inches. Courtesy of Hunsaker/Schlenger Fine Art.

Armor Oste, Hawkinson seems to grasp the fact that cellular death is a primary sign of human existence, an insight that capitalizes on his manipulation of nearly immortal materials like latex and aluminum to assert the transcendental ways in which time and technology act out our certain biological death.

Nowhere does the artist speak so baldly and so eloquently on the themes of death and transcendence than in two works, *Bird* (1997) and *Ballerinas* (1995). For their size alone, *Bird* and *Ballerinas* may be overlooked by spectators mesmerized by the Schwarzeneggerian scale and special effects of other pieces, but these two fey works, as much as the muscular *Überorgan*, embody the aura of Hawkinson's tactile agility in handling materials and methods that lie. *Bird*, made from clipped fingernail shavings and superglue, is an itty-bitty monument to evolutionary science. *Ballerinas*, as described at the outset, displays, in mural size, a Ballet Tocado-type troupe of campy transcendental nymphs. Both *Bird* and *Ballerinas* are silly renditions of big, radical, theoretical ideas—namely, the origin of the species and the transmigration of the soul. Humble, fragile, and apparently constructed with as much time, energy, and concentration as any supreme cosmological or evolutionary scheme, both pieces zero in on the never-ending human desire to transcend earthly bipedalism in hopes of taking flight. In the hands of a younger artist the ideas of flight and transcendence might be visualized in terms of superhero mutations, but in Hawkinson's pre-X-Men vocabulary, *Bird* and *Ballerinas* encourage us to reconsider two powerful tropes of nineteenth-century intellectual and aesthetic passion: Darwin's birds and the Romantic Terpsichore. Where the former reminds us of the moment when evolutionary theory joins with archaeology to usher in a new materialist age of scientific inquiry, the latter remains in the western imagination as the classical ideal of daemonic transformation.

For all of its historical and metaphysical inferences, Hawkinson's art practice is decidedly focused on contested evidence of contemporary corporeal existence. More than plastic, more than fingernail parings, more than sleight-of-hand tricks that turn foam rubber into a transfigured saint, the mystery of corporeality in Hawkinson's oeuvre is truly an electronic affair. Without the juice of the AC/DC gods, Hawkinson's twelve apostles might never have received grace. Without the alchemical fire of electrical currency, *Überorgan* would surely have sagged to the floor to join Panamarenko's behemoth testimonies to a bygone industrial age of flight. Electricity is our modern-day nectar of unseen gods turning on metro power systems to light up the world, speed-skating bundles of information across sophisticated fiber optic systems, transforming the world economy overnight. In the hands of a Nikola Tesla, electricity became something Promethean, visionary, and as Tesla believed, electromagnetic. One wonders if Hawkinson, like many Angelenos, has made a pilgrimage to visit Tesla's experiments housed at the famed Griffith Observatory. It seems both men share the same passionate, enigmatic

desire to transform material substance by means of electrical current. More *chindogu* master than scientist, Hawkinson departs from Tesla's patent ethos and ventures instead into the space that harbors the cool, the considered, the spiritual in art.

As I have tried to show throughout this essay, Hawkinson's relationship to "spiritual matters," is convincingly wrapped up in a complex, hoary tale of historical and technological phantasms that include the charged, if you will, marriage of alchemy with electricity and the drama that ensued over modernity's acceptance of the marriage in mystical terms. Wired-culture commentator Erik Davis believes the drama has come to express itself in three narrative possibilities, namely, "The fascination with the vitalities of bodies, the desire to spiritualize material form, and the millenarian drive to transmute the energies of earth into the divine realization of human dreams." If Davis is right in his estimation of what shapes our modern psyche, Hawkinson would be one of the most likely artists of our age to help us decipher our spiritual angst and our mystical rantings by turning metaphysical truths upside down and inside out for full and fantastic artistic inspection.

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